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SOME PEDAGOGICAL DANGERS IN RECENT LINGUISTIC TRENDS. (REPRINT, IN INT. REV. OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS IN LANG. TEACHING, 4(3)/157-164, SEPT. 1966).

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PUB DATE SEP 66

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.09 HC-$0.44 11P.

DESCRIPTORS- *APPLIED LINGUISTICS, *GRAMMAR, *LEARNING PROCESSES, *MODERN LANGUAGES, *TEACHING TECHNIQUES, AUDIOLINGUAL METHODS, INDUCTIVE METHODS, PATTERN DRILLS (LANGUAGE), SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING,

THE OVERLY STRINGENT APPLICATION OF THEORIES OF RULE-GOVERNED GRAMMAR TO LANGUAGE TEACHING CAN CAUSE PROBLEMS FOR THE LEARNER. ELABORATION OF A RULE OF GRAMMAR IN ADVANCE OF DRILL HOLDS THREE DANGERS--(1) THE FALSE SECURITY WHICH RESULTS WHEN THE STUDENT FEELS THAT HE HAS LEARNED SOME ELEMENT OF VERBAL COMMUNICATION BECAUSE HE CAN STATE THE RULE, (2) THE INTERFERENCE IN UTTERANCE CONTROL, WHICH OCCURS NOT ONLY WHEN RULE-ORIENTED LEARNERS TRY TO SPEAK THE TARGET LANGUAGE, BUT ALSO WHILE THE PRACTICE DRILL IS IN PROGRESS, AND (3) THE FAILURE OF THE STUDENT TO LEARN HOW TO LEARN LANGUAGES, PROBABLY THE GRAVEST OF THE THREE DANGERS, FOR IT CAN HAMPER HIS LEARNING TO PERCEIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND TO ANALOGIZE. ON THE OTHER HAND, IF THE GRAMMAR IS PRESENTED AS A FINAL STEP OF A DRILL, OR NOT AT ALL, THERE IS THE DANGER THAT THE UNDERACHIEVERS, AND PERHAPS OTHERS, WILL BE INCAPABLE OF FORMULATING THE RULE FOR THEMSELVES. THE SOLUTION IS TO LET THOSE WHO CAN DISCOVER PATTERNS, DO SO. THEN, TOWARD THE MIDDLE OF THE DRILL PRESENTATION, THE TEACHER CAN ASK THE STUDENT WHAT IS TAKING PLACE GRAMMATICALLY, DISTILL HIS DESCRIPTION INTO A CONCISE, SCIENTIFIC STATEMENT, AND, FINALLY, PROVIDE ADDED DRILL FOR REINFORCEMENT. THIS ARTICLE IS A REPRINT FROM THE "INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING," VOLUME 4, NUMBER 3, 1966. (AUTHOR)

ED011739

1M 21010 F

# IRAL

International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching

Revue Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée: Enseignement des Langues

Internationale Zeitschrift für angewandte Linguistik in der Spracherziehung

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IV/3 (1966)

Julius Groos Verlag Heidelberg

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6900 Heidelberg/Germany, Gaisbergstraße 6–8
P.O. Box 629. Cable Address: Groos Heidelberg
Banking Account No. /2/52338 Deutsche Bank Fil. Heidelberg
Printed by Julius Beltz, Weinheim/Germany

Editors: A. P. van Teslaar, SHAPE, Paris
H.P.P. Walz, Heidelberg University, Plöck 50

Published quarterly
Erscheint vierteljährlich

| Subscription per Vol. | Europe (excl. France) | Overseas (excl. USA) |
|---|---|---|
| Individual | DM 38.– (US$ 9.50) | DM 39.– (US$ 9.75) |
| Institutional | DM 42.– (US$ 10.50) | DM 43.– (US$ 10.75) |
| Single Copies | DM 10.50 (US$ 2.65) | DM 11.– (US$ 2.75) |

Postage included
France: Price: NF 60 – Sole Agency: Librairie Marcel Didier – 4 et 6, rue de la Sorbonne – Paris V
USA: Price: US$ 10.75 – Sole Agency: Chilton Books, A Division of Chilton Company – East Washington Square – 525 Locust Street – Philadelphia 6, Penna. (19106)

Sonderdruck aus IRAL Vol. IV/3 (1966)

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# SOME PEDAGOGICAL DANGERS IN RECENT LINGUISTIC TRENDS

Richard Barrutia

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# SOME PEDAGOGICAL DANGERS IN RECENT LINGUISTIC TRENDS

Richard Barrutia

Après des luttes âpres les recommandations des linguistes ont prévalu et l'on a introduit l'enseignement inductif de la grammaire dans les classes de langues étrangères. Les avances récentes dans la description et l'explication linguistiques risquent de saper cette position si difficilement consolidée. Surtout grâce à l'application de la théorie des transformations les linguistes semblent être en mesure d'établir des règles grammaticales révélatrices des structures profondes des énoncés. Puisqu'on possède enfin des règles "correctes," elles devraient – dit-on – constituer le point de départ d'une leçon de langues; l'appel à des méthodes inductives dans l'enseignement n'était qu'un pis aller, aussi longtemps qu'on ne possédait pas de règles suffisamment exactes et puissantes.

Une telle position a des consèquences sérieuses pour l'enseignement. La méthode inductive garde toute sa valeur sur le plan de la psycho-pédagogie. Il est sûrement erroné de rejeter toute formulation de règles ou de la différer jusqu'à la fin d'un exercice. Mais en la mettant au début de l'exercice, on sacrifie une grande partie de l'éfficacité pédagogique. Une position intermédiaire constitue le meilleur équilibre parmi les forces en présence.

Nach erbitterten Kämpfen haben die Empfehlungen der Linguisten die Oberhand behalten: der induktive Grammatikunterricht ist in den fremdsprachlichen Klassen eingeführt worden. Die in der letzten Zeit erreichten Fortschritte in der linguistischen Beschreibung und Erklärung laufen Gefahr, diese so schwer gefestigte Position wieder zu untergraben. Dank der Anwendung der transformationellen Theorie vor allem scheinen die Linguisten imstande zu sein, grammatische Regeln aufzustellen, die die grundlegenden Strukturen von Äußerungen enthüllen. Da man endlich „korrekte" Regeln besitze, müßten diese – so wird behauptet – den Ausgangspunkt einer fremdsprachlichen Unterrichtsstunde bilden. Die Heranziehung induktiver Unterrichtsmethoden wäre nichts als eine vorläufige Lösung, solange man noch keine ausreichend exakten und ernstzunehmenden Regeln besäße.

Eine solche Lage hat ernste Konsequenzen für das Unterrichten. Die induktive Methode behält ihren ganzen Wert im Bereich der Psycho-Pädagogik. Sicherlich ist es irrig, jegliche Formulierung von Regeln abzulehnen oder sie bis ans Ende einer Unterrichtsstunde zu verschieben. Stellt man sie aber an deren Anfang, dann opfert man ein Großteil ihrer pädagogischen Wirksamkeit. Der zwischen beiden Anschauungen eingeschlagene Mittelweg wird das richtige Gleichgewicht schaffen.

As applied linguists, we must not lose sight of the long and arduous effort that has been necessary to introduce the inductive learning of grammar in our foreign-language classrooms. Otherwise we risk reverting to earlier attitudes that were, and apparently still are, beguilingly attractive. In the presence of

increasingly precise structural linguistic analyses of a growing number of languages, the force of the applied linguist's argument in favor of teaching by example, imitation, and discovery rather than by rule is being steadily weakened. Sound language pedagogy is, ironically enough, being threatened by the very discipline to which it owes most. The reasons for this threatening reversal are fairly obvious. With some justice, theoretical linguists can claim that they are now describing grammar more correctly and more fully than ever before. From this fact, some of them have drawn dangerously false pedagogical conclusions: (1) Because – they say – we are finally learning to describe a language by the way that its speakers see reality, think of it and verbally react to it, we can now use our descriptions to better advantage for teaching language. (2) Because the prescriptive grammars of the past did not conform to the reality of spoken communication, we were forced to adopt teaching methods based on imitation and discovery. (3) Because our "rules" are now "correct," the knowledge of the rule should again come before possession of the rule [1]).

These assumptions are, of course, correct to the degree that theory, further descriptive study, and general understanding are concerned. To the degree that the actual practice of learning a foreign language is concerned, they are still untrue. Let us examine more closely the notion that knowing the rule will greatly aid in learning and, hence, in using a structure. "Knowing" a rule in this sense does not mean possessing it as an automatic function of verbal behavior. There are many linguists who know the rules of several languages quite well, yet can communicate adequately in only one or two of them. By their own admission, they are victims of another age, when languages were poorly taught.

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[1]) These ideas have also been expounded by several transformational linguists as well as in recent writing and lectures by William E. Bull and Robert P. Stockwell, among other American linguists. See, for example:

William E. Bull, *Spanish for teachers: Applied linguistics,* New York: The Ronald Press Company 1965, p. 18: "Learning to talk like a Spaniard means *first* to think like a Spaniard. This books is dedicated to the proposition that it is easier to learn to think like a Spaniard if the teacher can explain how a Spaniard thinks. It is assumed, consequently, the prime point of departure in teaching anything which is different from English is not the form or its combinatory potentials but the way of seeing and organizing reality which accounts for the existence and the existence and the functions of the form." (Italics added)

Eric. H. Lenneberg has pointed out to the contrary that "language 'training' and acquisition cannot possibly be the result of rational pre-planning because no adult 'knows' how he generates new grammatical sentences. ...Obviously, children are not given rules which they can apply. They are merely exposed to a great number of examples of how the syntax works, and from these examples they completely automatically acquire principles with which new sentences can be formed that will conform to the universally recognized rules of the game." "The capacity for language acquisition", in Jerry A. Fodor and Jerrold J. Katz, *The structure of language: Readings in the philosophy of language,* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964, p. 597 ff.

At the other end of this spectrum of linguistic "knowledge," we find millions of speakers who know nothing of the rules which govern the languages they speak, yet possess all the requirements for communication. Advocates of "rule-governed" learning go on to say that practice, drill, and overlearning are indeed necessary for the final automatic possession of structures, or, put another way, for the full possession of the rule. All agree, then, that much practice is necessary to bring about the desired terminal behavior. What are other natural consequences or by-products of such practice?[2])

It has for some time been a well-seated tenet of the psychology of learning that a student more readily learns and more persistently retains what he has discovered for himself[3]). If we accept this principle – and we have no reason not to – we must also apply it to the discovery of language structures by the student. Such an application raises a host of questions. How much should the student be responsible for discovering? How long should drills be repeated before the teacher explains the rule that governs the structure drilled? What if the student cannot find the pattern by himself? Is the time spent on drilling wasted by the poor student who cannot recognize structural relationships? What of the good student? Is he not bored by so much repetition of what he has long understood? When and how should the teacher give the rule – in the middle of a drill, in a distilled capsule at the end of a drill, in detail at the beginning, or not at all? Though such questions cannot yet be answered to everyone's satisfaction, reason and a prudent empiricism can lead us to working answers that are acceptable, even if provisional.

"If we wait," say those teachers who favor giving the rule first, "until the end of a drill to explain what has been happening we will have lost the benefit of a focal point while the drill was in progress. The student has no particular structure in mind to concentrate on while he practices. Success is extremely important and the student is immediately successful when he has been given the grammatical element involved, because he can then fix his attention on it, confirm the rule, and be satisfied that he has learned it."

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[2]) In a "Critique and reformulation of 'learning-theory' approaches to psychotherapy and neurosis," *Psychol. Bull.* 63, 5, 1965, Louis Breger and James L. McGaugh (page 355) state, "From our point of view, there is no reason to assume that people can give accurate descriptions of the central strategies mediating much of their behavior any more than a child can give a description of the grammatical rules which govern the understanding and production of his language. As a matter of fact, consciousness may very well be a special or extraordinary case–the rule being 'unawareness' of the mediating strategies–which is in need of special explanation, rather than the reverse."

[3]) Compare Wilga M. Rivers, *The psychologist and the foreign-language teacher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 152: "First, the structure or expression should be met several times in contexts where its relationship to the design of the language may be observed, and its meaning (structural, lexical, and social-cultural) inductively absorbed from its use in such varying situations."

"On the other hand," others argue, "if we give the rule first, we immediately deprive many students of the values of discovering the structure for themselves. Furthermore the rule will be explained eventually, and at that time the teacher can enlighten those who were not able to arrive at the correct concept." These teachers insist that the drill is *not* lost effort; the student would have needed it anyway to control the material governed by the rule. Later in this paper we shall propose an approach to grammar different from either of those just described.

Such alternate proposals are licit because research is not yet conclusive enough to set up a dogma. As Chomsky (1959) has demonstrated in his classic critique of Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* (1957), the basic facts of language learning and usage simply cannot be handled within a stimulus-response framework. It seems clear that an adequate view of language must account for the fact that humans, at a rather early age, internalize a complex set of rules which enable them to both to recognize and to generate meaningful sentences involving patterns of words that they may never have used before. Thus, in language learning, what is learned is not only sets of responses, but also some form of internal strategies or plans. We learn a grammar which enables us to generate a variety of sentences; we do not merely learn specific sentence habits. *How this grammar or set of strategies is acquired, retained, and used in language comprehension and generation is a matter for serious research effort.* It is clear that attempts to understand human language learning on the basis of analogies from bar-pressing experiments of animals are doomed before they start[4]).

Let us now return to the stand taken by those linguists referred to previously who are convinced that their rules are complete and perfectly derived from actual language utterances. Most of them take the position that explanation of the rule should precede its drill. Such a position represents a regrettable reversal of progressive trends in applied linguistics. Besides depriving the student of the privilege and advantage of making his own discoveries, this position hides three dangers.

The first is the *false security of 'knowing.'* For example, one can easily formulate the necessary rules and exceptions governing the use of the German case system. One set of prepositions requires the accusative, another the dative, another the genitive, another the accusative or dative according to certain semantic considerations. This rule can be mastered without any great difficulty. Within the space of a single study period, the necessary formulas may be committed to memory. The student then imagines that the problem is solved for all time. "Whenever I want to know what case to use," he thinks, "I need only remember what category the preposition belongs to, and I'll know what case is required." In practice, his knowledge of the rules and memory of the categories will soon grow blurred and fade away. Even if he does succeed in retaining the rules fresh in his memory, he will continue to need time for reflection before he is

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[4]) Noam Chomsky, A review of B. F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1957) in *Language,* 35. 1. 1959, 26–58. Italics added.

able to hit on the right case. In focusing his attention on the governing rules, he will be distracted from what he wants to say. By a false sense of security we mean that the student is misled into thinking that the rule is the most important learning task. He learns the rule easily and considers his work done. He fails to concentrate on the task of establishing habits. The result is often more rapid boredom during drill sessions because the student is impatient to get on to the next grammatical rule.

The second danger is that of *interference in utterance control.* In drill exercises, we are aiming at an almost unreflecting control of phonological elements that occur together in fixed semantic and syntactic sets. Certain kinds of explanation that appear even in texts by respected authors interfere with the acquisition of normal utterances. Telling a student that in order to say "I like beer" he must first put it into the form "Beer is pleasing to me," which then gives him *A mí me gusta la cerveza,* creates unnecessary difficulties. No such triple decoding is necessary. When teaching the French word *chauve-souris,* one does not have to point out that this is literally equivalent to "bald-mouse." And if we tell the student that *Ça se comprend* means "That understands itself," we are simply causing him needless perplexity. *Hauptstadt* is the German equivalent of "capital" (in the geographical sense), and we need not return to etymological habits by making an allusion to "head-town." Nothing is gained but much is lost at this level if we tell the student that the French say "I am become" instead of "I have become." Etymological discussions are valuable in later reading courses, not in initial skill-development ones.

So far, we have mentioned only one (semantic) type of "rule-first" interference: there is another, even more insidious type that occurs during drill sessions. Here is an example. An English student wishes to form, as a constructed utterance, the German sentence *Ich habe mit größtem Vergnügen seinen freundlichen Vorschlag angenommen* from the previously memorized words in isolation (probably from vocabulary lists) *ich, haben, mit, groß, Vergnügen, sein, freundlich, Vorschlag, annehmen.* Besides having to determine (in accordance with rules of word order) the relative position of the nine primary units, he has to perform the following twelve operations:

1. Choose the appropriate form of the pronoun of the first person singular.
2. Choose the appropriate tense of the verb *annehmen.*
3. Derive the present tense first person singular form of *haben.*
4. Determine the case governed by the preposition *mit.*
5. Derive the superlative form of the adjective *gross.*
6. Determine the gender of the noun *Vergnügen.*
7. Derive the masculine dative singular form of the superlative adjective *grösst* — when not preceded by a determinative.
8. Determine the gender of the noun *Vorschlag.*
9. Determine the function of this noun in this particular sentence.

10. Determine the form of the possessive adjective of the third person masculine singular when modifying a masculine accusative singular noun.
11. Determine the form of the adjective *freundlich* when preceded by a possessive adjective and when modifying a masculine accusative noun.
12. Derive the past participle *angenommen* from the infinitive.

It will be noticed that most of these operations require, in addition to a perfect memory of the grammatical rules (including numbers of word lists), a fine power of logical discrimination. Needless to say, *no* speaker of German actually does perform any of these operations (except perhaps on very rare and special occasions); we dismiss as a patent absurdity the supposition that the young native child constructs his utterances in any such way or that the learner must [5]).

The important feature to be remembered about interference in utterance control is that this interference takes place not only when rule-oriented learners try to speak the target language but also while a drill is in progress, if the rule has been pointed out beforehand. In other words, premature disclosure of the rule interferes with automatic habit development just as much as it does with later attempts to formulate phrases in normal communication. When the learner finally gets to the point where he can communicate fluently, it is because he has forgotten the rules and has at last developed some native-like habits of automatically changing a large group of memorized kernel sentences into many of their permitted transformations.

The last danger is probably the gravest. It concerns the teaching of inadequate learning attitudes and habits. No one will claim that with two, three, or four years in a language class we can teach a student *everything* he might want or need to know about foreign languages. He may one day need to study related or exotic languages. But even if it is only to continue on his own with his own chosen language, the value of training the student to look for patterns, comparisons and analyses is evident. This kind of training has considerable carryover into composition courses, literature courses, advanced conversation courses, and indeed every facet of language study he can possibly encounter. Obviously, a teacher will not always be on hand to simplify analyses for him and point out what might have been obvious had earlier instruction better prepared him to "learn how to learn languages." [6])

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[5]) This example is from H. E. Palmer s 1922 classic *The principles of language-study*. London: Oxford University Press, 1964, 119–20.

[6]) A related idea can be found in the 1965 Breger and McGaugh article, *op.cit.*, page 356: "Learning a new language involves the development of a new set of strategies for responsing–new syntax as well as new vocabulary. Language learning *may or may not* be facilitated by an intensive attempt to make the individual *aware* of the strategies used, as is done in traditional language instruction which teaches old-fashioned grammar, and as is done, analogously, in those psychotherapies which

Confirmation of this argument is implicit in many of our best texts on linguistics. Henry A. Gleason's *An introduction to descriptive linguistics,*[7]) for instance, has a workbook in which the student works out problems and makes many linguistic discoveries for himself. Perhaps an even better example is Kenneth L. Pike's *Phonemics*[8]), with its hundreds of problems in the "Kalaba" language he invented. The student must comb through these sets of "words" looking for patterns or clues by which he can formulate the phonemic rules governing the sets. Such exercises increase his sensitivity to the many different types of patterns that might crop up at any time in natural languages. The good language teacher should feel an equal responsibility to develop in his students the ability to recognize language patterns.

What course of action accords best with current theories of learning psychology and at the same time takes into account the more powerful linguistic descriptions that are becoming available?

At the risk of appearing a "mugwump," I suggest a prudent eclecticism that avoids the defects of either of the two teaching procedures we have described — the presentation of grammatical rules entirely before or after any pattern drill. Two major considerations support such an eclectic stand. One is the problem of the under-achiever, and possibly others, who may be completely incapable of formulating the appropriate rule after a complex structural drill. It is obviously prudent to abandon the extreme position that "no grammatical explanation is ever necessary," or even that it should be postponed till after all drill. The other consideration, which we have already touched upon, concerns the importance of discovery procedures for increasing learning and retention. We shall therefore want to avoid premature disclosure of the rule.

Our solution should be apparent by now: Why not let those who can discover patterns do so by presenting the drill first without explanation? Then toward the middle of a drill the teacher asks the student to describe what is taking place grammatically. The teacher can then further distill the student's description into a more concise and scientific statement. This procedure serves as a reinforcement for all the students who have seen the light; the slower students hear an explanation from a student's point of view and have it repeated more succinctly by the teacher. At this point, however, *all* the students still need much more practice before they have internalized the concept involved. The teacher therefore continues the drill, picking up the residue of slower learners

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stress insight. Alternatively, language learning sometimes seems most rapid when the individual is immersed in surroundings (such as a foreign country) where he hears nothing but the new language and where his old strategies and responses are totally ineffective."

[7]) Henry A. Gleason, Jr., *An introduction to descriptive linguistics.* Revised edition, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1961.

[8]) Kenneth L. Pike, *Phonemics: A technique for reducing languages to writing.* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1947.

and providing reinforcement and added practice for all. It is, of course, understood that the teacher is prepared to adjust the moment of grammatical enlightenment during a drill in accordance with the needs and capacities of the particular class.

Plans to generate plans of grammatical usage can be projected into an infinite variety of unforeseen situations when the appropriate moment comes. As Wilga M. Rivers has said in her excellent book, *The psychologist and the foreign-language teacher,* "These are the master Plans that enable the individual to face up to any conversational situation, *but for real fluency the student will need to have had considerable practice in putting Plans of the subordinate type into rapid operation, through some such procedure as pattern drill.*" [9])

It's when we lose sight of our final objectives that we tend to adopt extreme positions. Some of our best linguists seem to be forgetting that the purpose of foreign language instruction is to teach language communication, not linguistics. We can hope that the exciting new insights of these linguists into the ways language functions and is generated will be used by teachers everywhere but – and this proviso is the point of the whole discussion – that these insights will be used with tact, at the proper *pedagogical* moment.

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9) Rivers, *op. cit.*, p. 130. Italics added.